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**Learner characteristics and learning outcomes on a distance Spanish course for  
beginners**

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## **Learner characteristics and learning outcomes on a distance Spanish course for beginners**

### **Abstract**

Much Second Language Acquisition research focuses on young learners in the conventional classroom. Instructed adult learners, and in particular those who are learning at a distance, have attracted less attention. This group is substantial and growing: the Open University, the largest higher education language provider in the UK, alone recruits some 8,000 language students a year. The present large-scale study was undertaken to explore the learner characteristics and learning experience of adult distance language learners at beginner level, the relationship of these factors with successful language learning, and the outcomes of face-to-face or online tuition.

A longitudinal, quantitative design was adopted, involving pre-course and post-course questionnaires, and incorporating data on student profiles and learning outcomes. The questionnaire covered biographical variables, self-assessed initial proficiency, enjoyment and perceived achievement. This article profiles the learners and identifies factors related to successful distance language learning. Success is shown to relate to enjoyment and a sense of achieving goals. A comparison of results following online and face-to-face tuition demonstrates for the first time at scale that different modes of tuition do not necessarily lead to different learning outcomes: online language learning can be as effective as face-to-face teaching.

## **Keywords**

**Language learning, distance learning, online learning, learning outcomes, adult learners, learner characteristics**

## **1 Introduction and literature survey**

In the United Kingdom, the proportion of university language students who are part-time and non-specialists is growing (Byrne, 2008, Coleman, 1996a, 2004, Ferney, 2005, Footitt, 2005, Pilkington, 1997). Numbers of adult language learners outside the university sector are also very substantial, with a majority of learners at an early stage in learning a language (CILT/ALL/NIACE, 2005, Moys, 2004, Footitt, 2005).

Although total numbers of adult learners fell between 1999 and 2007 from 5% to 4% of the population, partly thanks to reduced funding for local colleges (Aldridge, 2001, Dutton and Meyer, 2007), 18% of British adults claimed to have improved their command of a foreign language in the previous two years, and 24% expressed the intention of doing so (Eurobarometer, 2006).

A substantial proportion is also studying at a distance: the UK Open University admitted its first language students in 1995, and now recruits some 8,000 a year. Distance language learning is a growing research domain (Coleman, 2006, Holmberg, 2005, Holmberg et al., 2005, Shelley and White, 2003, White, 2003, 2005). Once perceived as an industrialised form of teaching, the focus has more recently fallen on constructivist theories and on learner independence and interdependence, with learning taking place in a community where control is negotiated through interaction. Among the work on developing good practices (cf. Álvarez and Garrido, 2001,

Shelley and White, 2003), Garrido (2005) provides a full account of the development and delivery of a distance language course, embracing target language culture(s), linguistic varieties, uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), individual learner needs and differences, the development of intercultural competence, promotion of oral skills, assessment and feedback. Informing all issues is the central problem of overcoming physical separation to ensure the interactions which are as essential within the predominant Vygotskian approach to learning through social interaction as to cognitive approaches.

Since distance language learners working independently at home are responsible for the pace and direction of their learning to a far greater extent than conventional students, autonomy – and in particular self-management – is also a central concern (Ding, 2005, Murphy, 2005, 2007, 2008, White, 1995). While a majority of research into distance and especially online language learning has been cognitively focused, Hurd (2005a, 2005b, 2007) relates the autonomy debate to other influential factors including affect (notably motivation), previous learning, learning styles, strategies and beliefs. Distance learning and online learning are by no means synonymous, but the progressive, theory-driven introduction of new technologies (Hauck and Hampel, 2005) has led to widespread use of online conferencing, providing synchronous audio (and sometimes video) channels, synchronous textchat, and a range of supplementary tools including graphic interfaces such as shared whiteboards. The affective challenges of online language learning include anxiety and motivation (Hauck and Hurd, 2005, Hurd, 2007, Hurd et al., 2001). Interactions online are harder to analyse than those in a conventional classroom (Hampel et al. 2005, Heins et al. 2007). A distinctive pedagogy with targeted tutor training is required (Hampel, 2003, Hampel,

2009, Hampel and Hauck, 2006, Hampel and Stickler, 2005, Hauck and Stickler, 2006). It is asserted on the basis of a small study (Hansson and Wennö, 2005, N =22) that online learning can achieve the same learning outcomes as face-to-face tuition, albeit by a different route. As computer-mediated communication for language learning (Lamy and Hampel, 2007) becomes increasingly 'normalised' (Bax, 2003), comparisons between online and classroom learning may become more commonplace, but the present study is the first to look at comparative outcomes on a scale large enough to provide robust conclusions.

Of all the affective factors influencing success in all language learning, including distance language learning, motivation is perhaps the most significant. Whilst the present study did not target motivation as a construct, it did examine some of the elements which have been assumed to contribute to motivation, and which have figured in earlier studies of adult learners, namely enjoyment and sense of achievement. For at least two decades, the virtuous circle linking motivation and success in language learning has been recognised (e.g. McDonough, 1986, Skehan, 1989, Ellis, 1994), and Coleman's two successive large-scale studies of university language learners confirmed its operation at tertiary level in the UK (Coleman, 1995, 1996b, 1996c). It would be simplistic to equate high motivation with successful language learning. Nonetheless, three measures of successful language learning, appropriate to the particular learning context (see below), are available for the students in this empirical study:

- completion of the one-year course, including coursework and end-of-year assessment

- pass in the overall assessment (comprising both coursework and spoken/written examination)
- continuation to the next-level course.

Alongside these different individual trajectories, we explore other factors which have been identified as having an impact on successful language learning, including perceived initial proficiency, enjoyment of the course, perceived progress towards achieving learning goals, and the biographical factors gender, age, educational attainment, and previous instructed/naturalistic language learning.

## **2 Context**

In 2003, more than eight years after opening its first language course, and having conclusively demonstrated that communicative language teaching at a distance and at scale could be highly effective, the Open University (OU) recruited to its first Beginners courses in Spanish and German. (Owing to a restrictive contract with the BBC, the first courses launched from 1995 had to be at *post-Beginners* level.) All OU undergraduate courses are part-time and distance-taught, and there are no admission requirements. In the absence of a supportive environment, a peer group and entrance qualifications, drop-out rates naturally tend to be higher. The determination required to complete an OU language course is greater than for conventional students, and the role of student motivation throughout the course correspondingly more crucial. The profile of OU students, especially on popular beginners courses, is typically much wider than in conventional, full-time, face-to-face universities: they range from those who have no experience at all of higher education to highly qualified students who

have successfully studied with the OU or in conventional higher education over many years. Some may be taking a beginners course in order to gain credits towards an OU qualification despite pre-existing knowledge of the target language.

Since the OU's courses are open to all, including those unable or unwilling for whatever reason to travel to classes, all tuition is optional. The 'teacher's voice' – i.e. the multiple roles played by a teacher in a conventional classroom – is replaced by text, sound and images: the teaching is embedded in the learning materials themselves, which are developed over a period of up to three years by a team of specialists. OU distance language courses are widely regarded as an international benchmark: of more than one million downloads from the *iTunes U* OU site between June and December 2008, more than half were samples of language courses.

While required study time is comparable to that in face-to-face institutions, tutorial contact on OU courses is limited, in the case of beginners Spanish to 21 hours per year, and is delivered by specially trained part-time tutors. All students on the first beginners courses were offered a choice between entirely face-to-face tuition and entirely online tuition, using the virtual tutorial environment Lyceum. Lyceum was developed at the OU, and offers multiple synchronous audio channels as well as textchat and a range of shared graphic interfaces, a combination of tools which allow activities similar to those of a conventional classroom and which are designed to achieve the same learning objectives. See Hampel and Hauck (2004) and Hampel (2006) for a more complete description of Lyceum and of the distinctions in task design and tutoring between face-to-face and online audiographic environments. In



the present study, with the exception of sections 5 and 6, no distinction is made between students opting for online or face-to-face tuition.

The Open University operates a modular system, in which students register for a single module, rather than a full degree course, although some do seek to accumulate credits towards certification. At degree level, the award may be a generic BA/BSc (Open) or a named pathway, such as the current BA in Modern Language Studies, which encompasses compulsory as well as some optional elements. Of the 360 credits required for a British Bachelor's degree, no more than 60 can be at Level 1 (Beginners/Intermediate), with the remainder drawn from Level 2 and Level 3 courses, which correspond to the upper years of the three-year Bachelor's degree in conventional UK universities. Lower-level OU qualifications such as a Certificate or Diploma in Higher Education are also available, as are named Certificates in individual languages, e.g. Certificate in Spanish for successful completion of the Beginners and Intermediate Level 1 courses, or Diploma in Spanish for successful completion of the two 60-credit courses at Levels 2 and 3. The 30-credit Beginners Spanish course may therefore stand alone, or contribute to a range of specialist and non-specialist qualifications, but there is no automatic sequence or progression. In addition, and in contrast to conventional universities, many students enrol just for the learning, rather than its certification

### **3 Method**

A longitudinal design was adopted, using pre- and post-questionnaires to trace changes in learners' perceptions related to their learning experience. The

questionnaires, which also embrace aspects not covered in the present article, were devised and piloted by the researchers, drawing on the published literature, and adapted for distance learners. Ethical clearance was obtained. Personal biographical data, course registration and assessment scores were available within the OU, and have been used according to the University's strict ethical guidelines.

The first cohort registering for Spanish in either face-to-face or Lyceum mode were invited in November 2003 to complete a pre-course questionnaire. At the completion of the course, in December 2004, before results were known, a second questionnaire was sent to all those who could still be contacted, a total of 1676. Appendices 1 and 2 contain those items relevant to the present article. Each questionnaire was sent by post with a stamped addressed envelope for return, and responses to closed items were subsequently scanned into an SPSS database.

### **3.1 Numbers and outcome groups**

The first questionnaire was completed by 1345 students (response rate 68.6%), the second by 724 students (response rate 43.2%). Of the 584 who completed both questionnaires, 21 required special consideration by the examiners, and were excluded from the study. The remaining 563 could be readily allocated, on the basis of their learning outcome, to one of four categories subsequently referred to as 'outcome groups'.

The total includes 528 'completers' who submitted all six pieces of assessed coursework (tutor marked assignments or TMAs) and took the end-of-course

examination. Of these, 505 were awarded a pass or distinction. 293 of these successful completers chose to register immediately for the post-beginners course (L140): this outcome group is designated Complete-and-Continue or CC, and may be considered to comprise successful learners who have retained high motivation for learning Spanish. The remaining 212 successful completers make up the Complete-and-Pass (CP) outcome group, who have maintained motivation through to successful course completion, but opted not to proceed further at present.

A further 23 respondents completed the course and all the assignments, but failed the overall assessment. These unsuccessful completers make up the Complete-and-Fail (CF) outcome group. Predictably, many of those who failed to complete the course did not fill in a second questionnaire. However, of those who did complete both questionnaires, there were still 35 who failed to submit all coursework and/or to sit the final exam, and who failed the course: this outcome group was designated Non-Complete-and-Fail (NF). Subsequent tables refer, unless otherwise stated, to ‘all both’, i.e. those who completed both questionnaires and for whom a result was available (N=563). Where appropriate, the ‘all pre’ (N=1345) data are also provided. The respondents are summarised in Table 1, the outcome groups in Table 2.

**TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

## **4 Results**

## **4.1 Learner Characteristics**

### **4.1.1 Gender**

Among those completing the pre-course questionnaire (N=1345), 888 are females (66.0%) and 457 males (34.0); for both questionnaires (N=563) the figures are females 387 (68.7%) and males 176 (31.3%). This gender distribution, with a predominance of women, is extremely close to that of undergraduates following full-time language courses in conventional British universities, where the corresponding official figures for full- and part-time UK students in languages were (N=115 110) females 68.9%, males 31.1%, and in Spanish (N=8 255) females 66.6%, males 33.4% (HESA, 2005).

The tables which follow show the percentage of each category (column 1) falling into each of the outcome groups (columns 2-5). In our research sample, overall completion rates and pass rates are similar for males and females (Table 3), but males who pass are more likely to continue to the next course than their female counterparts.

### **TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

### **4.1.2 Age**

In terms of age, respondents exemplify the older student who typically opts for an Open University course: 55% of all students on beginners Spanish in 2003-04 fell into the age range 30 to 49, with rather more in the 30-39 than the 40-49 band. Around

20% were aged 50-59. In our sample, which uses different age ranges, the median age is something over 45 years (Table 4).

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Apart from the small youngest group (all of whom completed successfully, but few of whom opted to continue) and the small oldest group (who were most likely not to complete, or else to complete but fail), there are similar patterns across the age groups as far as completion, success and continuation are concerned.

#### **4.1.3 Prior educational level**

Since the Open University is open to all, no formal qualifications are required for admission, and over more than thirty years, it has been clearly shown that adults with no formal qualifications can benefit from supported distance learning. Data on highest prior educational level is collected for all students, and coded into one of sixteen categories. These were reduced to five categories of previous educational qualifications for the present study:

- Low: less than General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level / General Certificate of Secondary Education, the public examination normally taken at age 16 (or equivalent)
- Lowish: fewer than two passes at GCE Advanced Level, the school-leaving examination normally taken at age 18 (or equivalent)
- Medium: at least two passes at GCE Advanced Level, i.e. the usual university minimum entry requirement (or equivalent)

## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

- High: university-level qualification below bachelor's degree (or equivalent)
- Very high: university first or higher degree (or professional equivalent)

Table 5 shows the percentages of respondents falling into each category.

### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

The most characteristic feature overall is the high educational level of learners, particularly those who completed both questionnaires. The fact that the sample contains so many respondents who bring to a Beginners Spanish course successful experience of university-level learning inevitably limits the generalisability of the study's findings. In any event, although a low educational level is a disadvantage for a small number, the predictive value of prior educational level is otherwise small (Table 6).

### TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

## **4.2 Previous relevant knowledge**

### **4.2.1 Previous knowledge of Spanish**

Like most adult language courses, the OU course, which, in common with all OU courses and in accordance with the ethos of the institution, has no admission criteria, attracts false beginners: two out of three of those registering admit to having some prior knowledge. The extent of (self-assessed) previous knowledge of Spanish might be expected to predict both course outcome and likelihood of proceeding further, and

it is indeed clearly the case that those starting the course with prior knowledge are more likely to appear in a high-motivation outcome group (Table 7). The correlation between previous knowledge of Spanish and successful completion is weak ( $r = .184$ ) but significant at the 99% level.

TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

However, the degree of prior knowledge varies, and most students have at most survival Spanish, i.e. assert nothing beyond ‘a few words’, ‘a few simple phrases’ or ‘phrases for getting by’. Nonetheless, as might be expected, higher initial proficiency is a good indicator of later success and continuation (Table 8), although in some cases (the small CF outcome group) there seems to be a pattern of repeated inability to progress.

TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

Five of the six individuals claiming more advanced prior knowledge (‘more extensive conversation’ in ‘all both’) chose not to study further. Four of these respondents cited seeking an OU qualification as their most important reason for studying Spanish, so it seems probable that they took the course simply to gain additional credits for a wider qualification. The other required Spanish for work.

Even (self-assessed) basic social conversation is a good predictor of success (Table 9).

TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE

And a high proportion of the true beginners (by their own assertion: self-assessment is a limitation of all questionnaire studies) also succeeded, although one in eight failed to complete and one in twenty completed the course but failed the assessment (Table 10).

#### **TABLE 10 ABOUT HERE4.2.2 Sources of previous knowledge of Spanish**

Respondents with some previous knowledge of the language (see Table 7, above) were asked how they had gained this. The most frequent responses were through contact with native speakers or by self-study. Non-completers had typically acquired knowledge through contact with native speakers, while those who completed and passed the course were more likely to have (also) learnt Spanish through self-study (Table 11).

With a pass rate of 95.5% (see Table 12), previous self-study of Spanish was a marginally better indicator of a probable successful outcome to the OU Beginners Spanish course than was previous formal study at school or college (94.8% pass rate) or contact with native speakers (91.2% pass rate). Only the link with previous self-study was statistically significant, and that at a very low level ( $r = .131, p = .02$ )

It is not unexpected to find a link between effective OU study and prior independent study, nor that students with multiple previous experiences of learning Spanish should be found in the CC outcome group, i.e. have registered for the subsequent course after succeeding at beginners level. This may well reflect more developed study habits.



TABLE 12 ABOUT HERE

20% of the small NF outcome group, i.e. 7 individuals, have fewer than 5 passes at GCSE/O level. Their general lack of school experience is reflected in their low exposure to Spanish in formal contexts, and the outcome may reflect less developed study habits. It should be noted that, until very recently, Spanish lagged well behind French and German as a school subject in the UK.

#### **4.2.3 Personal experience of Spanish-speaking countries**

Respondents were also asked about their personal experience of or contact with Spanish-speaking countries before starting the course (Table 13). All had some contact, mostly through holidays, and secondly through friends there. At the time of the survey, Spain was the UK's top choice for second homes abroad, and there were 224 841 British residents in Spain, with numbers rising (IESE – IRCO, 2005). Spain was then, and remained for many years, the most popular destination for British holiday-makers, attracting 28% of nearly 39 million holidays abroad in 2001 (ONS, 2003) and the same share of 45.3 million trips in 2006 (ONS, 2008).

The CF outcome group scores highest on all four measures involving personal contact, i.e. those which are 'interactive' rather than 'non-interactive' and which would therefore normally predict greater gains for low-level learners (Spada, 1985, 1986, Freed, 1990). Their failure in assessments may reflect a greater attachment to practical outcomes – using their Spanish in real-life situations – than to accumulating

academic credits; or else that incidental use of Spanish does not guarantee academic success, due perhaps to poor study skills, over-confidence, under-confidence or lack of commitment to achieving certification. The mismatch does not arise from the type of assessment: OU assessments balance production and reception, spoken and written skills, and focus on communication as well as accuracy. The CF group is, in any case, small in number. On the other hand, it is unsurprising to see the CC group recording the highest non-interactive contact with the language and culture, through Spanish-sourced written and spoken media. Use of such resources is typical of successful independent language learners who attribute success to effort, apply metacognitive and other strategies, and actively manage their learning.

TABLE 13 ABOUT HERE

As would be expected, contact with Spanish speakers and texts is linked to successful and continued language learning (Table 14).

TABLE 14 ABOUT HERE

#### **4.2.4 Previous experience of other language learning**

Another variable among survey respondents was previous experience of learning a foreign language. Survey respondents were asked to list languages spoken (including their mother tongue) and level of proficiency in each (from ‘beginner’ through ‘intermediate’ and ‘advanced’ to ‘fluent’ and ‘mother-tongue’). Nearly sixty languages from Afrikaans and Arabic to Yoruba and Zulu were mentioned. Most respondents were native English speakers (table 15).

TABLE 15 ABOUT HERE

However, the number of languages and levels, and the multiple responses from respondents who ranged from monolinguals to polyglots speaking up to six languages, make it impossible to go far beyond the most obvious statements (see Table 16):

- Those with no other language skills were more likely to find themselves in the CF or NF groups
- Those with one or more additional languages to an advanced or fluent level appeared more likely to successfully complete the course.

It is, however, interesting to note that while the CC group appears to have rather lower levels of prior language skill than the CP group (and considerably more of the former were beginners in any language), this did not affect their motivation to continue (persistence). Alternatively, since prior language skills were self-assessed, it is possible that the CC group tended to be either more modest or more realistic in their estimation of their own skills.

TABLE 16 ABOUT HERE

#### **4.2.5 Previous experience of distance language learning**

The majority of students had no prior experience of independent or distance language learning: this confirms the finding on self-study (Table 11, above). But whether or not they had already experienced independent or distance language learning did not predict their course outcome (Table 17). However, one in five of the students had already followed an Open University language course. Since this was the very first

year in which Beginners courses were available, these students must have followed (though not necessarily successfully) a higher level course in French or German – or perhaps even in Spanish, since on principle, and although advice is given on the basis of a diagnostic language test, admission is unrestricted.

TABLE 17 ABOUT HERE

## **5 Mode of tuition**

Few studies exist which compare, on an equal basis, the outcomes of conventional face-to-face tuition with those from online tuition. It goes without saying that the experience of both student and tutor is very different depending on the tuition mode. It is also true that, since the University's equal opportunities policy demands that meetings with a tutor should be optional, a substantial element of tuition in the Open University's distance courses takes place through the comprehensive materials themselves, and through written and oral feedback on written and oral assignments. Nonetheless, the present study provides, for the first time at scale, the possibility of evaluating whether online teaching can deliver the same outcomes, in terms of target-language spoken and written skills, as conventional small-group classroom teaching.

The answer is a clear yes (Tables 18 and 19).

TABLE 18 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 19 ABOUT HERE

There is no correlation at all between mode of tuition and outcome ( $r = .039$ ,  $p = .353$ ). While the tutorial experience will have been different, since face-to-face and online pedagogies are themselves different, this study has shown – importantly – that learning a language with face-to-face or online tuition can achieve entirely comparable outcomes. It should be noted that, although the groups were self-selected, they were entirely comparable in age, gender, highest prior educational level, and previous knowledge of Spanish, with the sole exception that over-65s ( $N = 34$ ) predominantly ( $N = 33$ ) opted for face-to-face tuition.

## **6 Enjoyment and perceived progression towards learning goal**

It would be expected that those who enjoy a language course might be more motivated to devote effort to it, and to do well in assessments. It would also be expected that they would experience a sense of achievement even before knowing the final results of their exams. The post-questionnaire sought respondents' views on

- How far they felt they had progressed towards their most important learning goal (five-point Likert scale from 'not at all' to 'completely');
- How much they had enjoyed the course (five-point Likert scale from 'not at all' to 'very much').

For 'all both' respondents ( $N=563$ ), mean perceived progress was good at 3.36 (median 3) and mean enjoyment high at 4.14 (median 4). The majority of students both enjoyed the course and felt they had made good progress. There was also a very clear correlation at the 99% confidence level between course enjoyment and

perceived goal achievement (all both  $r = .45$ ; CC  $r = .32$ ; CP  $r = .387$ ; CF  $r = .579$ ; NF  $r = .674$ ), as illustrated by Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Although results had not been notified to students when they completed the second questionnaire, there was a correlation at the 99% confidence level between pass/fail and both enjoyment ( $r = .318$ ) and perceived goal achievement ( $r = .334$ ).

### **6.1 Enjoyment and mode of tuition**

Not only did face-to-face and online tuition lead to comparable results, they also offered similar levels of course enjoyment (Table 20).

TABLE 20 ABOUT HERE

There was no significant difference between the two groups.

### **6.2 Perceived progression towards learning goal and mode of tuition**

Although face-to-face and online tuition achieved similar enjoyment levels and learning outcomes, there is a marginal difference in students' perceptions of progress towards their most important goal ( $F = 3.88$ ,  $p = .050$ ) (Table 21).

TABLE 21 ABOUT HERE

## 7 Summary and conclusion

This article profiles the first large cohort of students following a distance beginners course in Spanish with the UK's Open University. For the purposes of the year-long study, success in meeting the ongoing challenges of distance language learning was measured by course completion, success in in-course and final assessment, and continuation to the next higher-level course. Among those completing both pre-course and post-course questionnaires, this provided four 'outcome groups' (see Table 2).

In terms of gender, the sample's distribution matched that of full-time language students at conventional universities, whilst in age it was typically higher, and, in both age and highest prior educational level, more heterogeneous. The median age was over 45 years, and two out of five students already held a university degree. However, neither gender, nor age, nor prior educational level was significantly linked to outcome.

Two-thirds of students were '*faux débutants*', with some, mostly basic, acquaintance with Spanish. In most but not all cases, previous knowledge was a pointer towards success on the course. The greater the previous experience, the better – although even basic knowledge helped, and most true beginners also passed the assessments.

Previous self-study appeared to be of value. All respondents had visited a Spanish-speaking country, mostly for holidays. Unexpectedly, the Complete-and-Fail group recorded the highest levels of previous interactive contact, perhaps because they were more focused on learning than on certification, while the Complete-and-Continue group had most contact with Spanish media.

## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

Nearly 90% of students were native speakers of English, but monolinguals fared less well than those with a more multilingual profile. Previous distance language learning conveyed no clear advantage. Most students had enjoyed the course, and felt they had progressed towards their learning goals, with a clear link between enjoyment and perceived progress. Mode of tuition – whether face-to-face or online – had no impact on pass rates or student enjoyment, although online tutees were marginally less likely to feel they had achieved their learning goal.

According to its mission statement, ‘the Open University is open to people, places, methods and ideas’. The results of the present study suggest that, while certain characteristics and experiences may convey some advantage, all are able to successfully acquire beginners Spanish, whoever they are, wherever they are and however they study.

### Appendix A: Pre-questionnaire items

	Yes	No
1 Do you have any previous knowledge of Spanish?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 If you answered “Yes” to Question 1, how much previous knowledge do you have?		All that
Please put a cross against all the options that apply to you.		apply
• a few words		<input type="checkbox"/>
• some simple phrases		<input type="checkbox"/>
• phrases for getting by (e.g. when shopping or travelling)		<input type="checkbox"/>



## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

- basic social conversation ☐
- basic work-related conversation ☐
- more extensive conversation ☐
- other (please specify) ☐

**3** If you answered “Yes” to Question 1, how did you gain this previous knowledge? **All that**

Please put a cross against all the options that apply to you.

**apply**

- from school ☐
- from college ☐
- from contact with native speaker(s) ☐
- from self-study ☐
- other (please specify) ☐

**4** Have you had personal experience of or contact with any Spanish-speaking countries? **All that**

Please put a cross against all the options that apply to you.

**apply**

- I have been on holidays in a Spanish-speaking country ☐
- I have lived in a Spanish-speaking country ☐
- I have friends in a Spanish-speaking country ☐
- I have work contacts in a Spanish-speaking country ☐
- I have watched Spanish films, plays or TV (either in the original language or in translation) ☐
- I have looked at Spanish newspapers or magazines ☐
- other (please specify) ☐

**5** Enter all the languages that you speak

(including your mother tongue) in the

**Mother**

rows below, and put a cross in ONE of

**Beginner**

**Inter-**

**Advanced**

**Fluent**

**tongue**

the boxes in each row to indicate your

mediate

## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

										<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
										<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
										<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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										<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(Example)

R	U	S	S	I	A	N		
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- 6**    Where or how did you learn languages other than your mother tongue?

Please put a cross against all the options that apply to you.

  - at school
  - at college
  - at university
  - in an adult education class
  - through the Open University
  - through self-study
  - by living or working in the country in question
  - from family members
  - other (please specify)

All that

apply

☐  
  
☐  
  
☐  
  
☐  
  
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- 
- 7**    Do you have any previous experience of independent or distance language learning?

Please put a cross against all the options that apply to you.

  - No previous experience of independent or distance language learning
  - Linguaphone (or similar systems)

All that

apply

☐  
  
☐

## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

- BBC courses ☐
- online learning ☐
- Open University course ☐
- other correspondence course ☐
- other (please specify) ☐

### Appendix B: Additional post-questionnaire items

- 1 How far do you feel you have progressed towards achieving your most important goal?

*(Please cross one box only)*

Completely

Not at all

5

4

3

2

1

☐☐☐☐☐

- 2 How much have you enjoyed studying *Portales*?

*(Please cross one box only)*

Very much

Not at all

5

4

3

2

1

☐☐☐☐☐

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**Figure 1: Correlation between course enjoyment and perceived goal achievement**

**Table 1: Numbers of respondents**

Designation	Description	N
All pre	Completed pre-questionnaire	1345
All both	Completed pre- and post-questionnaire	563

**Table 2: Outcome groups**

		Completion	Success	Continuation	N
CC	Complete-and-Continue	√	√	√	293
CP	Complete-and-Pass	√	√	X	212
CF	Complete-and-Fail	√	X	-	23
NF	Non-Complete-and-Fail	X	X	-	35

**Table 3: Percentage of males and females in each outcome group**

	CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
Female (N=387)	49.1	41.6	5.2	4.1	100
Male (N=176)	58.5	29.0	8.5	4.0	100
Total (N=563)	52.0	37.7	6.2	4.1	100

**Table 4: Percentage of respondents in each age group**

## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

	CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
18-24 (N=14)	28.6	71.4	0	0	100
25-34 (N=95)	57.9	34.7	5.3	2.1	100
35-44 (N=151)	51.7	34.4	9.3	4.6	100
45-54 (N=148)	52.0	39.9	2.7	5.4	100
55-64 (N=121)	53.7	38.8	5.0	2.5	100
65-82 (N=34)	41.2	32.4	17.6	8.8	100
All (N=563)	52.0	37.7	6.2	4.1	100

**Table 5: Respondents' highest prior educational level**

	low	lowish	medium	high	very high
All pre	7.4	25.8	18.8	12.7	35.4
All both	5.6	23.9	15.1	13.8	41.5

**Table 6: Outcomes for students of different highest educational levels  
(percentages)**

	CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
Low (N=30)	46.7	20.0	16.7	16.7	100
Lowish (N=128)	50.8	38.3	4.7	6.3	100
Medium (N=81)	54.3	37.0	0	8.6	100
High (N=74)	56.8	32.4	5.4	5.4	100

# Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

Very high (N=222)	51.4	41.9	3.2	3.6	100
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**Table 7. Percentage of respondents to pre-course questionnaire (N=1345) with previous knowledge of Spanish**

	No previous knowledge of Spanish	Previous knowledge of Spanish	Total
All pre	34.8	65.2	100
CC	24.6	75.4	100
CP	34.4	65.6	100
CF	43.5	56.5	100
NF	65.7	34.3	100

**Table 8: Extent of previous knowledge of Spanish (multiple responses possible so totals exceed 100%): percentage of total group**

	A few words	Some simple phrases	Phrases for getting by	Basic social conversation	Basic work- related conversation	More extensive conversation	Other
All pre	38.6	38.4	26.4	9.4	2.2	1.0	1.3
All both	36.8	38.4	32.7	12.8	2.5	1.1	1.4

Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

CC	38.6	43.3	41.3	15.0	3.0	0.3	0
CP	36.3	34.9	24.1	11.8	2.8	2.4	1.9
CF	43.5	43.5	26.1	8.7	0	0	0
NF	20.0	14.3	17.1	2.9	0	0	0

**Table 9: Course outcome of the 72 students citing ‘basic social conversation’ skills prior to the course (percentages)**

CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
61.1	34.7	2.8	1.4	100

**Table 10: Course outcome of 178 students claiming no knowledge of Spanish prior to the course (percentages)**

CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
40.4	41.0	5.6	12.9	100

**Table 11: Source of previous knowledge of Spanish (percentages of total sample citing each answer) (multiple answers possible)**

	School	College	Contact native speakers	Self-study	Other sources
All pre	7.9	11.6	26.6	29.0	13.6
All both	8.3	13.1	24.2	31.8	16.00

Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

CC	8.5	13.7	25.9	39.6	18.4
CP	9.4	14.7	22.6	25.9	14.2
CF	8.7	13.0	17.4	13.0	17.4
NF	0	2.9	22.9	14.3	5.7

**Table 12: Course outcome of students claiming prior knowledge of Spanish from self-study, school or college, or contact with native speakers (percentages)**

	CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
Self-study (N=179)	64.8	30.7	1.7	2.8	100
School or college (N=116)	52.6	42.2	4.3	0.9	100
Contact native speakers (N=136)	55.9	35.3	2.9	5.9	100

**Table 13: Personal experience of Spanish-speaking countries (percentages; multiple responses possible)**

	Holidays	Lived there	Friends there	Work contacts there	Spanish films, plays, TV*	Spanish newspapers or magazines	Other
All pre	82.5	5.1	23.9	7.7	20.2	23.6	9.3
CC	84.6	5.8	24.9	8.9	24.9	33.8	10.6
CP	77.8	5.2	22.2	7.1	19.3	19.3	9.0



### Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

CF	87.0	8.7	26.1	13.0	8.7	8.7	4.3
NF	77.1	2.9	22.9	8.6	11.4	17.1	8.6

\* either in Spanish or in translation

**Table 14: Percentage of those citing each type of contact with the Spanish language who achieved each outcome**

	CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
Holidays (N=460)	53.9	35.9	4.3	5.9	100
Lived there (N=31)	54.8	35.5	6.5	3.2	100
Friends there (N=134)	54.5	35.1	4.5	6.0	100
Work contacts there (N=47)	55.3	31.9	6.4	6.4	100
Spanish films, plays, TV* (N=120)	60.8	34.2	1.7	3.3	100
Spanish newspapers or magazines (N=148)	66.9	27.7	1.4	4.1	100

\* either in Spanish or in translation

**Table 15: Mother tongue**

	Mother tongue English	Mother tongue not English	Mother tongue unknown	Total	Number of other MTs mentioned
All pre	1164	87 (6.5%)	94 (7.0%)	1345	29

## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

	(86.5%)			(100%)	
All both	493 (87.6%)	37 (6.6%)	33 (5.9%)	563 (100%)	17

**Table 16: Highest level in other languages spoken (percentages of responses by outcome group)**

	No other language spoken	Beginner or Intermediate	Advanced	Fluent*	Total
All pre	20.9	57.8	9.0	12.3	100
CC	16.0	60.8	10.2	13.0	100
CP	9.4	54.2	11.8	24.5	100
CF	30.4	65.2	4.3	0	100
NF	25.7	68.6	2.9	2.9	100

\* Approximately half of those respondents categorised as fluent were either mother tongue speakers of other languages or bilingual, e.g. Welsh/English.

**Table 17: Previous experience of distance language learning (percentages)  
(multiple responses possible)**

	No previous	Lingua-phone or	BBC	Online	OU	Corres-pondence	Other
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### Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

	experience of independent or distance language learning	similar					
All pre	60.4	10.8	9.0	2.8	20.1	5.4	4.0
All both	54.0	11.9	11.5	3.2	25.4	5.7	3.9
CC	53.7	13.0	14.3	3.1	20.5	6.5	3.8
CP	51.9	9.9	9.4	3.3	32.1	4.7	3.8
CF	56.5	17.4	8.7	4.3	21.7	0	4.3
NF	57.1	11.4	2.9	2.9	28.6	8.6	5.7

**Table 18: Outcome by mode of tuition**

	Pass	Fail
Face-to-face tuition	401 (90.1%)	44 (9.9%)
Online tuition	104 (88.1%)	14 (11.9%)

**Table 19: Outcome group by mode of tuition**

	CC	CP	CF	NF	Total
Face-to-face	230 (51.7%)	171 (38.4%)	17 (3.8%)	27 (6.1%)	445 (100%)

## Learner characteristics and learning outcomes

tuition					
Online	63 (53.4%)	41 (34.7%)	6 (5.1%)	8 (6.7%)	118 (100%)
tuition					

**Table 20: Enjoyment by mode of tuition**

	Mean enjoyment	Median enjoyment
All both (N = 563)	4.14	4
Face-to-face tuition (N = 445)	4.16	4
Online tuition (N = 118)	4.08	4

**Table 21: Perceived progression towards learning goal by mode of tuition**

	Mean perceived progression towards learning goal	Median perceived progression towards learning goal
All both (N = 563)	3.36	3
Face-to-face tuition (N = 445)	3.41	3
Online tuition (N = 118)	3.20	3

Figure 1

